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TAGS: [KPAO](#) [OEXC](#) [OIIP](#) [SOCI](#) [PREL](#) [MU](#)

SUBJECT: SPECIAL OMAN ONLINE: A/S HARTY RESPONDS TO AL-SABLAH PARTICIPANTS ON STUDY IN THE U.S. AND VISA PROCEDURES

1. Summary: The Omani Internet chat rooms "al-Sablah" and "al-Majarra" are the liveliest and most comprehensive Arabic-language fora for political and social discourse in the country, touching on issues and personalities rarely addressed in the conventional media. While not totally free, nor wholly reflective of Omani public opinion, these popular sites nevertheless offer a worthwhile window into the hot topics and unvarnished views of the day. This edition of Oman Online contains the following topics:

-- The truth about U.S. visa applications and encouraging Omani students to study in the U.S.

End summary.

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Harty Responds  
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2. During her April 8-10 visit to Oman, Assistant Secretary of State for Consular Affairs Maura Harty responded to questions from al-Sablah members about educational opportunities in the United States as well as U.S. visa application procedures. In the process, she also addressed misperceptions that the United States no longer welcomes Arab visitors and that the visa process is beset by long delays.

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The Dialogue Begins  
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3. One al-Sablah member greeted A/S Harty stating, "We welcome you to al-Sablah and thank you for agreeing to talk with us frankly about visa issues and study in the U.S." A/S Harty responded, "Thank you for this opportunity to dialogue with you. It is just this type of freedom of expression that we value and treasure in the United States. We need not always agree. Indeed, decisions made by our friends around the world may be upsetting to us from time to time, but it is critical that the dialogue continue."

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Myth Busting and Fact Sharing  
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4. A/S Harty's participation in the discussion generated a great deal of online interest. Although a fair number of members chose to use the Assistant Secretary's presence on the site to critique U.S. foreign policy, many others expressed genuine concerns about visa procedures, the process of clearing immigration upon arrival in the U.S., and anxiety about perceived anti-Arab sentiment in America. One al-Sablah participant asked, "Why is it that Arabs are automatically considered suspect? Why are they susceptible to long detentions even if they are only suspected of being a threat? What guarantee is there that innocent Omani students will not be treated in this way?" A/S Harty helped to calm the fears of al-Sablah members by providing factual information about the visa process and immigration procedures. She explained the safeguards that are in place to protect people suspected of crimes, and stressed that the new U.S. immigration procedures protect not only Americans, but also everyone in the United States, reminding her interlocutors that people from 90 different countries were killed in the September 11 attacks.

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Dialoguing  
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5. The following is a summary of representative questions and A/S Harty's responses to them:

Does the U.S. Embassy offer scholarships for Omani postgraduate students wishing to further their studies in America?

-- Yes, the U.S. Embassy administers a number of competitive U.S. government scholarship programs for Omani students who want to study in the U.S. Under the programs, students can obtain Bachelors, Masters, or Ph.D. degrees. Information about these programs is available on the Embassy web site [www.usa.gov.om](http://www.usa.gov.om). The names of two programs related closely with higher education

opportunities in the United States are the following:

- The Fulbright Foreign Student Program, which provides scholarships to individuals interested in pursuing graduate degrees in the United States;
- The Partnerships for Learning Undergraduate Studies program (PLUS), which provides scholarships for students who wish to pursue bachelor degrees in the liberal arts, humanities, and social sciences.

Do American universities offer scholarships for postgraduate study to foreign students?

-- Yes, many American universities offer scholarships to foreign students for study at all levels. I recommend that you contact the universities directly regarding their policies. Should you require assistance, you may also contact the Educational Advisor at the U.S. Embassy.

How can I apply for a scholarship?

-- There are several ways to learn about scholarships. I recommend that you begin by reviewing the web sites of universities that interest you. These sites often list scholarship opportunities provided by the institutions, their eligibility requirements, and their application process. Another option is to contact or visit the U.S. Embassy's Educational Advisor to discuss scholarship opportunities for Omani nationals. The Educational Advisor can be reached at the following number: 24-698-989 ext. 201 or [www.usa.gov.om](http://www.usa.gov.om).

If I want to change my visa from a work visa to a study visa, will I have to pay a fee? Is it difficult to change one's visa status?

-- The answer to these questions will depend on your particular circumstances. I suggest you contact the Consular Section at the U.S. Embassy and explain your situation to them. They will be able to advise you with more accuracy. You can contact the Consular Section at the following number: 24-698-989 ext. 294/216.

Will I be able to get a student visa? I hear the process takes a long time.

-- More than 98 percent of Omani applicants for U.S. student visas obtain them and the vast majority of the visas are issued in 24 hours.

Is it true that Arab and Muslim students are mistreated in the U.S., especially since September 11?

-- The U.S. continues to welcome Arab and Muslim students. Many colleges and universities have active Muslim student associations that provide members with social and religious networks. In addition, there is a high degree of respect for religious and cultural differences throughout U.S. society. It is unfortunate that media reports of a few isolated incidents of intolerance following September 11 have left an erroneous impression that Americans are hostile toward Arabs. Nothing could be further from the truth.

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Communication & Understanding  
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16. A/S Harty concluded her dialogue with al-Sablah members stating, "We want Omanis to come to the United States to better understand us as a nation in the same way that I have come to Oman to better understand Oman, its people and culture. I very much appreciate the hospitality of the many Omanis I was able to meet during this visit. I am eager to underscore the United State's strong desire to cement the very firm and enduring friendship we share with the good people of Oman."

17. The Embassy's Consular Section will continue to respond to questions raised as a result of A/S Harty's participation in the online forum.

BALTIMORE